Recall those lazy days spent as a child, curled up with a blanket, some hot chocolate, and a really good book. This is quite a comforting scene, and one that many people are probably at least a little familiar with. Books are something we generally take for granted. However, there are many children who are not given such opportunities, and do not have either parents or teachers who are dedicated to nurturing a developing love for reading. “The problem is that policies and funding streams are too fragmented, programs too segmented by children’s age and grade, and key interventions too partial to get widespread, positive, results” (Why Reading). Reading aloud to children bolsters learning, and strategies associated with read-aloud activities both at home and at school are being developed and more readily observed. When engaging in read-aloud activities with students, teachers and parents should implement active interaction during the reading of the text to promote higher-level thinking and development.

“Of the fourth graders who took the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading test in 2009, 83% of children from low-income families – and 85% of low-income students who attend high-poverty schools – failed to reach the “proficient” level in reading” (Why Reading). This serves as an indicator that in some cases, not enough is being done to encourage the developing literary skills of young children. Read-aloud sessions, when handled correctly, can be extremely beneficial in a child’s oral language development. On the other hand, if done incorrectly with no added stimulation or discussion, such sessions can become mundane and even hinder literacy development. Studies conducted in 1993 by Meyer, Wardrop, Linn, and Hastings concluded that “there are low to moderate negative correlations between time teachers spend reading aloud and their students’ reading achievement” (Lane 668). In essence, if teachers simply read to children, with no engagement and probe to their curiosity, children will easily become bored and cease paying attention.

It has been proven multiple times that engaging in multiple read-aloud strategies with children produces beneficial results. Because different children have varying needs based on their exposure to literature and general upbringing, when they attend school they may be on different levels, making it difficult for teachers to gauge the time needed to devote to techniques. “The amount of read-aloud time appropriate in a high-poverty school may be different than what would be appropriate in a school with a more affluent population” (Lane 669). Additionally, based on a student’s individual needs and if working independently – one on one- with a student, the text selection can be very important. This is because each type of book has a different focus in the read-aloud process. “Alphabet books are excellent for teaching about letters, and storybooks are useful for developing vocabulary. Informational books can help children develop content knowledge and enhance their motivation from reading” (Lane 669).

One proposed method to maximize the effects of read-aloud discussions is dialogic reading. Dialogic reading, initiated primarily by Whitehurst, focuses on feedback of the reader and the complexity of conversation. “The emphasis should be on asking ‘what’ questions, following answers with questions, repeating what the child says, and providing help and praise” (Lane 670). Additionally, the intricacy level of the conversation should be a level slightly above the current capabilities of the child.

When reading, efforts should be made to encourage young readers to form connections to any type of background knowledge of which they are aware. There have been three types of connections identified that readers can make: text-to-self, text-to-text connections, and text-to-world. Text-to-self connections focus on crafting relations between textual context and personal experiences or ideas. Text-to-text connections focus on the identification of similarities and differences between the current literary work and those read or listened to in the past. Though helpful for all ages, this type of connection is particularly beneficial, if texts in the range of the child’s developmental stage are utilized. “For example, with three-year olds you could read two bedtime stories, both using similar patterns: Goodnight Moon by Margaret Wise Brown and Good Night, Gorilla by Peggy Rathmann, and then discuss the similarities and differences” (Trelease 80). And lastly, text-to-world connections “require relating certain aspects of the text to what is happening or what has happened in the larger community of the world – for example, comparing current and historical events and people with that of the text” (Morrison 114). The order these techniques were described (self, text, and world) is the order in which the techniques should be implemented. When encouraging students to become aware of connections, it is most beneficial for the teacher or parent to demonstrate these connections themselves. Developing brains learn best by example. It is important to “use strategy-related language, for example, ‘When I read this part of the story where (refer to the part), I thought about…’ ‘This part is just like…,’ or ‘This is similar to’” (Morrison 114). Young readers tend to automatically make connections to their own knowledge about the subject at hand; thus, prompting conversations about a student’s background knowledge fosters connections and prolongs attention span. However, the younger the reader, the lesser amount of connections he or she is able to make. “In order to do so, they must be mature enough to keep more than one thing in their minds at a time – a basis for comparative thinking” (Trelease 80).

Another interesting strategy that is gaining in popularity and legitimacy is the Alphaboxes, based on the studies of Hoyt. This approach has students coming up with examples/details from the text – each example beginning with a certain letter of the alphabet. Through this textual interaction, students “generate questions; highlight important concepts; make connections; provide explanations; locate, identify, and discuss unfamiliar words; and present different points of view” (Morrison 112). All of these leads to the ultimate drawing of connections and digestion of data, because they are higher-level cognitive procedures which encourage cognition. Working on Alphaboxes in groups is even better, because “their thinking is distributed among group members, and participants share cognitive responsibility while externalizing their thoughts as they work through tasks” (Morrison 112). Vanessa Morrison was able to sit in a classroom and collect/witness students’ work describes Alphaboxes in the following fashion, based on her in-class experience. She introduced the idea to the children. By the “end of the year and without me asking…they are filling in more and more of the boxes. It’s important to say that at the beginning…I talked them through the activity…I showed them how…I modeled for them” (Morrison 112)

It is also important to note the significance of vocabulary development through reading aloud. Thus, text talk, a read-aloud strategy to strengthen vocabulary, was developed by a team headed by Beck and McKeown. In the classroom, teachers should pick of few core words from the story to discuss in-depth; this should become the main point of the lesson. Word selection is important, and should focus on “words that can be connected to what students know, can be explained with words they know, and will be useful and interesting to others” (Lane 671). These words can be organized into three tiers. Tier one words are common and reoccurring in everyday interaction – examples are school, hungry, and baby. Tier 2 words are those that are less common, but still vital to understanding language use, and able to use in everyday conversation. For this reason, it is suggested that this tier be used as a general starting point. Tier three words are often extremely difficult for children to grasp, because they are focused around a specific subject area (i.e. science). For example, isotope and photosynthesis are both three tier words, while coincidence and devour are two tier words. One can readily see the difference. The next step of text talk is to create definitions easily understood by young children. Dictionary definitions, because of the caliber of understanding often required, are generally not very useful for children. “A child-friendly definition uses everyday language to explain the meaning of the word” (Lane 672).

“Print referencing refers to the verbal and non-verbal cues, such as tracking print or pointing to print in pictures, adults use to call children’s attention to important aspects of the text, including its forms, features, and functions” (Lane 672). There are multiple types of cues present throughout each story, both nonverbal and verbal. Verbal cues occur when the reader (teacher or parent) stops to comment or question on something from the text; nonverbal cues consist of, for example, pointing to words in certain lines when reading. This technique can “promote children’s development of print concepts, concept of word, and alphabet knowledge” (Lane 672). However, one must be careful not to overbalance this technique, because too much print referencing can take away from the meaning that should be gleaning from reading a book. It is estimated that anywhere from three to five print references during the reading of an averaged-size storybook is acceptable (Lane 673). Good Night Moon was aforementioned in a prior paragraph, and serves as a prime example for print referencing. Verbal referencing can be used to draw the child’s attention to the color and illustration aspects of the text. These elements are not always beneficial to understanding the text and should not always be examined in depth, but here they provide an interesting lesson. As the story progresses, the clock hands change position and the sky outside the window grows darker. One could engage the reader by asking what such changes represent, and their influence upon the story.

Especially with young children, a short attention span can be a potential problem. During early elementary school, some children have not yet had adequate experience with books. When one does not understand the concept of stories and books, “it [is] impossible for him to have a concept of them and the pleasure they afford. No experience means no attention span” (Trelease 39). Thus, involving discussions throughout the reading is beneficial. Also, it is important for parents to follow through with what they have begun to read. “Don’t leave the child or students hanging for three or four days between chapters and expect interest to be sustained” (Trelease 107). If the reading process must be interrupted, it is best to end the reading for a particular day at a suspenseful point, so the children have something to look forward too.

In conclusion, interactive activities between an adult and student are a valuable enhancement to the read-aloud process. Such actions ensure that the developing child is drawn to a higher level of thinking. Cognitive abilities are strengthened, encouraging a love and respect for reading that otherwise would not be as nurtured or expanded.

*\*Mrs. Ward – there are still a few places I want to beef up a bit, but this is what I have as of now.*